

**The Construction of the United States Capitol:
Recognizing the Contributions of Slave Labor**

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On December 8, 2004, Congress directed the Architect of the Capitol to study the contributions of slave laborers in the construction of the Capitol and to provide a report within 180 days. As the agency's architectural historian and someone who has researched and written about Capitol history for many years, I was given the responsibility of preparing the report.

I began my research at the National Archives, where the Capitol's earliest construction records are kept. From past experience I knew that research into the records from the 1790s would yield the information I needed. The records of the Office of Public Buildings contain the financial records of the Commissioners of the District of Columbia, who were the officials in charge of building the Capitol, the White House, and the other early government buildings in Washington. The ledgers list every expense incurred by the Commissioners, and it is there that one sees the names of hundreds of local residents receiving payments for the work of their slaves.

From 1795 to 1801 there were 385 payments for slave labor at the Capitol. Rarely was the type of work enumerated or explained: rather, the ledger recorded payments simply as "Negro Hire." Payments for food, provisions, and medical care were also recorded in these ledgers. In 1795 the Commissioners declared that they needed 100 slaves for the next year's work on construction projects throughout the city. The owners would be paid \$60 a year, a sum of money that was raised to \$70 in 1797.

In the course of my research I discovered that renting slaves was a fairly common practice in the Potomac region. George Washington, for instance, sometimes found it necessary to rent

slaves from his neighbors to help with harvests or spring house cleaning. Slaves with construction skills, such as carpenters or bricklayers, were highly sought after. For example, James Madison's father managed a side line construction business based on his slaves sawing planks, making clapboards, and building fences.

Historical documents tell us that slaves worked at the quarries which supplied sandstone for the Capitol and White House. The principal contractor at Aquia Creek, Virginia, advertised for "Sixty strong, active Negro Men" and promised their owners that "They shall be well used and well fed." Another contractor, who was supplying foundation stone for the Capitol in 1793, was instructed to keep his hands at work from sunrise to sunset, "especially the Negroes."

Another backbreaking job that seems to have been done mainly by slaves at the Capitol was sawing—both stone sawing and timber sawing. Sawing stone was slow work, with a steel blade making the cut with wet sand providing the abrasion. One of the Commissioners suggested purchasing slaves to work in the stone cutting business, and to reward their work with freedom after five or six years of service. This idea, however, was not approved and the Commissioners continued to rent slaves throughout this period.

While cutting stone was hard work, timber sawing was worse. After they were stripped of bark, logs were rolled over pits dug into the earth. The slave down in the pit would have one end of a five or seven-foot long whip saw and his partner on top would have the other end. Chalk lines guided each pass of the saw, which rained down a shower of saw dust on top of the hapless person in the pit: wearing a hat and veil offered a little protection. Payment records at the Archives tell us that some of the rented slaves were able to earn their own wages by sawing timber on Sundays or holidays, and were thereby able to purchase little luxuries—and perhaps even their freedom.

The brick business was also heavily dependent on slave labor. Black women and children were used to mold the clay before it was stacked in the kilns. Skilled slaves laid bricks, while their unskilled brethren delivered brick in hods carried up ladders on their shoulders. White bricklayers at the Capitol were paid \$2.26 per thousand bricks laid, but the earnings of their employees or slaves was not recorded.

Of all construction work performed by slaves at the Capitol, perhaps carpentry was the most significant and ultimately the most influential. Slave carpenters were numerous on large plantations in the region. At Mt. Vernon, Washington had at least four slave carpenters making farm implements and building simple wooden structures and fences. Carpentry was a useful skill that was taught to slaves, passed down to succeeding generations, and grew more marketable as the city of Washington developed—a good carpenter could earn a living long after the public quarries had closed and pit sawyers had been replaced by saw mills.

It is no doubt true that slaves continued to contribute their skill and labor to the construction of the Capitol well after the 1790s. But with the advent of a private construction industry in nineteenth-century Washington, their names and accomplishments recede into the shadows. Rarely is there mention of slave labor in the Capitol's later period, but the earlier records illustrate the critical roles played by African American slaves in the building of our country's Temple of Liberty.